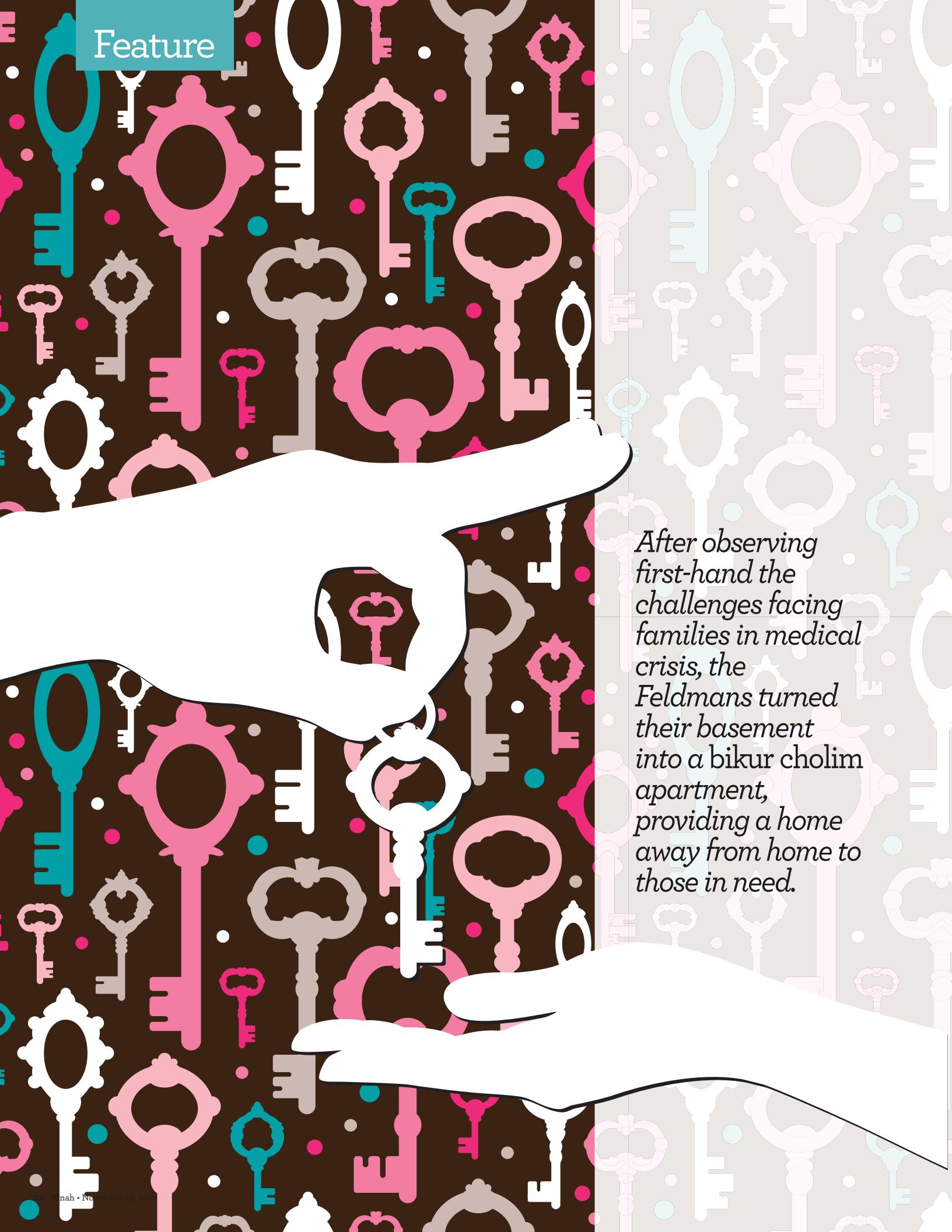


## Feature



*After observing first-hand the challenges facing families in medical crisis, the Feldmans turned their basement into a bikur cholim apartment, providing a home away from home to those in need.*

# Open Heart, Open Home

*A world of hidden chessed*

I had no idea.

We daven in the same shul and she teaches computers in my daughter's school. I've run into her many times. But until recently, I really had no idea.

Mrs. Dena Feldman runs a *bikur cholim* apartment in the basement of her Flatbush home. And as I spoke with her, it felt as though I was removing layers of wrapping paper, unearthing a hidden treasure.

“A

about 27 years ago a close family member became ill and we were plunged into the terrible world of illness,” Mrs. Feldman explains. “At around the same time, relatives from Eretz Yisrael came to America for medical treatment for their child. A wonderful family in the neighborhood was going away for an extended period, and they handed the keys to their home to our Israeli relatives, thereby enabling them to stay together. When their hosts returned, our relatives relocated to a *bikur cholim* apartment which, sadly, left much to be desired.

“They introduced us to another Israeli family, also in America for medical treatment. The apartment that these people were in had a broken window and no washing machine or dryer, making a difficult situation unbearable.

Because of our close involvement with both of our relatives in need of medical care and the Israeli family we met, we became very sensitive to *cholim* at that time and their many needs. That's why when our rental apartment upstairs became vacant we transformed it into an apartment for families of *cholim*.

I ask Mrs. Feldman to share some of her memories with me, and as she speaks, she reveals one beautiful treasure after another...

“Our first ‘tenant’ was Avrumi\*, a three-year-old boy missing all his fingers on one hand, who came with his parents to America to possibly have toes grafted to his hand to replace his missing fingers.

“Avrumi and his parents lived with us for about a year. Avrumi became great friends with my son who is the same

“They had few material possessions, but still wanted to leave us something. What they really left with us... is invaluable.”

age. The two of them were constantly up and down the steps, playing together, in between the many doctors' visits.

“Avrumi didn't end up having surgery, but his birth defect didn't prevent him from accomplishing anything, either. The family moved out because he was no longer considered a *choleh*, but they stayed in America, where he became a star student in the same class as my son in the Mirrer Yeshiva. He married a wonderful girl and has been blessed with beautiful children.

“And then there was Shmulik, a little boy with a brain tumor who came from Eretz Yisrael with both parents. People advised them to have one parent stay with Shmulik and the other parent should return home to their five other children...

“I don't know why, but I convinced them they should both stay. They lived upstairs for a full year, the mother filling her spare time by taking courses in education.

“Around a year later, with the child in remission, they returned to Eretz Yisrael. And then we received the terrible news that the husband had a brain tumor. They returned to our apartment. Doctors successfully removed the tumor, but once home, it came back with dreadful complications. The husband was completely incapacitated for the next 10 years until his death. Sadly, Shmulik passed away, too.

“Shmulik's mother had to become the breadwinner, and with the help of the courses she had taken while in New York, she became the principal of a school in the Old City. Those courses saved her life and sanity, and I'm grateful that I encouraged them to stay here together.

“We merited hosting an elderly, childless couple, the tzaddik and tzaddekes Rabbi Zev and Mrs. Chana Eidelman. Anyone who went to Bais Yaakov of Bnei Brak remembers Morah

Chana. Due to her illness, she needed medical treatment in the United States. Her husband, adhering to a *taanis dibbur*, didn't speak on Mondays and Thursdays, and yet, he had a way of greeting everyone with such a warm smile that people didn't realize he wasn't speaking.

“We learned so much from them during that year. For example, on Sukkos, Rabbi Eidelman needed a *sukkah* built according to the Chazon Ish's requirements. No screws, nuts, bolts... We hired Joe Sarabello, a local handyman, to help build a *sukkah* without nails. This *tzaddik* from Bnei Brak, who wouldn't speak during the month of Elul, nevertheless managed to convey his message to the burly Italian handyman.

“Rabbi Eidelman showed us that the words ‘*Basukkos teishvu shiv'as yamim...*’ means literally not leaving the *sukkah*. He demonstrated a high level of *dikduk* and *chavivus hamitzvah*, despite facing medical and spiritual challenges, which left an indelible impression on us and all of our friends and neighbors who merited knowing him. There still remains an early *Minchah minyan* on Shabbos afternoon at Rabbi Frankel's shul, which Rabbi Eidelman started.

“In his *tzava'ah*, Rabbi Eidelman left us a paper-cut artwork done by their adopted daughter, which reads ‘*Im eshkachech Yerushalayim...*’ They had few material possessions, but still wanted to leave us something. Truthfully, what they really left with us... is invaluable.

“We've also hosted many Mexican Yidden over the years. In fact, a short while before Rosh Hashanah (5772/2011), we got a call from Reb Joe Sambouli, our liaison from the Bikur Cholim in Mexico, about a young kollel couple and their son.

“The baby had been born with a partially developed heart and had undergone two operations shortly after birth to stabilize him. The parents had been informed that at age three he'd need to undergo major surgery.

"When the young couple walked into our *bikur cholim* apartment with their three-year-old son, Dani\*, I wondered if he had just finished sucking a purple lollipop or if he'd been playing with purple crayons, for his lips were a vivid shade of purple. But I didn't ask them anything, as they had just arrived from the airport. Instead, we immediately sprang into action. I drove them to the pediatrician to initiate the necessary procedures. I asked Dani's mother what I could give him. Her response: 'Milk... just milk.'

"When I went to visit Dani in the hospital the day after the surgery, I noticed his lips were no longer purple, and instead had a healthy, pink hue. He no longer subsisted solely on milk. Before the surgery he'd been too weak to eat anything — and so milk had been his main staple, supplying him with much-needed nutrition. But now he had the strength to actually eat.

"Dani and his parents stayed with us for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and by Sukkos they were able to return home. I recently received a photograph of Dani at his fourth birthday party and we look forward to iy" H attending his bar mitzvah in nine years.

"Shortly after Dani left, we had another success story, involving incredible *hashgachah* and a 10-year-old boy, Chaim\*, from Beitar.

"The ninth child of 10, Chaim had been sick with a bacterial infection about five years ago, had fallen into a coma, and almost died. He was left with compromised liver function and no kidney function at all, and for five long years was compelled to be on dialysis three times a week. Unfortunately, due to his malfunctioning liver, he was considered an ineligible candidate for a kidney transplant.

"And then a new drug that could help him with his partially functioning liver was discovered, but regrettably, he wasn't qualified for it in Israel. Since his parents felt that there would be more of a chance for him to eventually get a kidney if his liver function would

## A conversation with Bracha Feldman, Mrs. Feldman's 16-year-old daughter.

*Binah: Bracha, your parents have been doing this since long before you were born. When did you realize that your parents were doing something unique?*

Bracha: When I was in third or fourth grade, I realized that other people might have occasional guests, but we had people living at our home, sometimes even for a year.

*Did it ever seem like too much?*

Sometimes it would be difficult, like Erev Pesach, but most of the time, their presence added so much. It's also very uplifting to see how these people, despite difficulties and being in a foreign place with language barriers, remain upbeat.

*Any experiences you'd like to share with readers?*

There was a child who'd been living with us, and our neighbors knew he was part of our family. One time, before his mother even realized that he wasn't in the house, he was found lost on Avenue I by neighbors who recognized him and brought him back home to us.

A few months ago, we were sitting together on a Friday night — my married sister, a neighbor, my mother, and Aviva — all talking together. As Aviva spoke about her son, we all felt like he was our brother; there was such a strong feeling of *achdus!* Aviva and her son were always happy. I played games with him and even though he didn't speak English, he was always smiling.

There was a time that my sister stayed with a cardiac patient overnight in the hospital. Often, the people eat supper with us, and Shabbos meals, Yom Tov... They've really become part of our family. Before Rosh Hashanah we get so many phone calls from Eretz Yisrael.

*Would you want to do this when you get married?*

(No hesitation) Yes! I think it's a very nice thing. Even if your children don't like it right away, as time goes on, they'll end up appreciating how much they've learned from it.

improve, they decided to come to America in order to obtain this drug.

"While doing the paperwork that would enable him to be treated here, they added a request for a kidney. A Bobover *yungerman*, 22 years old and newly married, heard the story, got tested, and learned that he was a match.

"As hoped, the medication stabilized Chaim's liver function, and he ended up undergoing a successful kidney transplant at Montefiore Medical

Center in the Bronx. The 'angel' who had made the transplant connection for them disappeared, and Montefiore Medical Center's renowned live-donor organ-transplant program was shortly afterward shut down...

"For five months Aviva and her husband (Chaim's parents) lived here, leaving their other nine children, the eldest only 15 years old, at home in Beitar. No *parnassah*, terrible anxiety and fears... and yet, they had incredible *bitachon* and *simchas hachaim!*" Mrs.

“You learn from these people how to view life through rose-colored glasses. Everything was *gam zu l’tovah* to Aviva, and absolute *hashgachah*.”

Feldman exclaims.

“From the way you describe things, it sounds like you gain a lot of inspiration from the people you host,” I comment.

“I feel that they help us more than we help them,” Mrs. Feldman responds passionately. “Aviva was raised in an orphanage. You would think that after suffering so much she wouldn’t be a fargining or happy person. The only apparent influence of being raised in an orphanage was her determination that her children not be parceled out to different families. Baruch Hashem, she found a young couple to move into their home in Beitar, and was successful in keeping her children together.

“You learn from these people how to view life through rose-colored glasses. Everything was *gam zu l’tovah* to Aviva, and absolute *hashgachah*. She gave out special *sefarim* as a merit for a *refuah sheleimah*, and was always gracious, helping me in any way she could, baking and cooking with me...”

Impressed, I say, “Some people really become part of your life.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Feldman concurs. “I’m still in touch with a woman who had stayed with us over 16 years ago, who had a metastasized melanoma on her face. I never thought she’d survive. It’s a *nes* that she’s alive and living in Eretz Yisrael with her family.

“We’ve gone to weddings, shared in *simchos*...”

“How do you cope with the loss? How does it not get to you?” I ask.

There are a few seconds of silence. “Mostly, those who didn’t make it were *niftar* after they returned to their homes. So we heard about the loss, but from a distance.

“One time, though, there was a little boy who was *niftar* in the hospital while the family was staying with us. It was around the time of my son’s bar mitzvah. We arranged the *levayah*... it was very painful.”

She is reminded of another bar mitzvah experience with another one of her sons. “There is an eight-year-old

Israeli girl included in almost all our pictures,” she says, referring to this son’s bar mitzvah album. “She came around Rosh Hashanah time, with her grandmother and very ill mother, who as a divorcee was the child’s sole caregiver. By Chanukah, the mother was on a respirator, and was unfortunately *niftar* soon after. They sat *shivah* in our home.

“There was another couple who stayed with us for Pesach, the husband passing away soon afterward. But what a couple! I’ll never forget that Pesach, where we observed their Sephardic *minhagim*, walking around the *Seder* table, with our bags of matzos slung over our shoulders.”

“So not only do you provide a *bikur cholim* apartment and everything that entails, you even accommodate different *minhagim*!”

“Through having this apartment, we’ve hosted all different types of people, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, chareidim, and sometimes people who aren’t *frum*,” Mrs. Feldman explains. “Our criterion is that if you’re Jewish, we take you in.

“Imagine being thrust into a foreign country, with language barriers, life-threatening illness, and unfamiliar medical terminology. We’ve learned from experience that everyone has different tastes, diets, and cultural backgrounds... Often, I’ll take them shopping, or I’ll shop for them. Sometimes the women like to cook; there could be a lot of waiting, and a woman might feel the need to cook. Some women don’t want to cook, though, and prefer to eat out. Everyone is different.”

“There are those who settle into the apartment because they’re here for a long haul, and then there are those who basically put their belongings into the apartment and unfortunately spend most of their time in the hospital. Most of the time, no one knows.”

“When people come to America for medical treatment, there are often extended spans of time in-between

therapies. We've gone on trips together, showed them the sights. Sometimes that's the biggest chessed you could do: provide some emotional respite."

"How about security issues with people coming in and out of your house all the time?" I'm hesitant to ask.

"It's interesting," she says. "One of the biggest kiddush Hashem experiences with nonreligious people we've hosted is that we give them the combination number to our home. They can't believe that we're willing to give it to strangers. This was something we had to come to terms with right away, getting over the fear of breaches in our security. Once we did, we knew we were leaving it in Hashem's Hands."

"On the other hand," she continues, "privacy could be more of an issue. Walking into the house and finding strangers standing there takes more time to get used to. But privacy really is an American concept."

"If someone would like to open her home to *cholim*, what would you suggest she do?" I question Mrs. Feldman.

"I'd tell her to have patience," she says, surprising me with her reply. "Sometimes we have to wait a while in between 'guests,' but by then, we're

refreshed and eager to host them." She adds, "Often, there are emergency situations. I might get a call that the people will be over in 15 minutes, and we'll spring into action."

"I find that if you don't take too much upon yourself, you can do it for the long haul. I used to fill the refrigerator, making myself busy with preparations as soon as I'd get the call. And then suddenly, the plans would change. Or people would have different likes and dislikes. I've come to realize that it's preferable that I wait for the people to arrive before doing anything major. So I've learned to do a basic stocking... some milk, juice, bread... some Danishes. They're usually coming straight off the plane..."

"Do you ever feel that people are taking advantage?"

"No, not really," Mrs. Feldman pauses. "Most people don't want to take advantage, they don't want to overstay their time, and they realize that this is a *bikur cholim* apartment, which needs to be open for the next person who needs it, and not a hotel..."

I ask her to describe the apartment.

"It is no longer a separate apartment in a two-family house, but is now

located in our basement. There is a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen with a couch in it — so technically, there's sleeping space for four. Adjoining the apartment is my family's playroom, which is often also used by our 'guests.'

As we continue to speak and the layers are peeled away, I discover that not only have Mrs. Feldman and her family opened their home and hearts for the past 27 years, becoming attuned to their "guests'" various emotional, physical, and spiritual needs, but their proficiency in medical knowledge has grown greatly as well.

But it's obvious that she doesn't look at this as though she's giving... Hearing her enthusiastic responses to my questions, it's apparent that the Feldmans feel they're the ones who have amassed valuable treasures along the way. **B**

\*Name changed.

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Estie Florans, a freelance writer of fiction and nonfiction, is the author of Conquer the Darkness, Set Me Free, and the newly released Lift Me Higher, a true-to-life, contemporary novel for women and girls of all ages.